

(12) INTERNATIONAL APPLICATION PUBLISHED UNDER THE PATENT COOPERATION TREATY (PCT)

(19) World Intellectual Property Organization
International Bureau



(43) International Publication Date
12 July 2001 (12.07.2001)

PCT

(10) International Publication Number
WO 01/50297 A2

(51) International Patent Classification⁷: **G06F 17/00**

(21) International Application Number: PCT/IB00/01965

(22) International Filing Date:
22 December 2000 (22.12.2000)

(25) Filing Language: English

(26) Publication Language: English

(30) Priority Data:
09/475,064 30 December 1999 (30.12.1999) US

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(81) Designated States (*national*): AE, AG, AL, AM, AT, AU,
AZ, BA, BB, BG, BR, BY, BZ, CA, CH, CN, CR, CU, CZ,
DE, DK, DM, DZ, EE, ES, FI, GB, GD, GE, GH, GM, HR,
HU, ID, IL, IN, IS, JP, KE, KG, KP, KR, KZ, LC, LK, LR,
LS, LT, LU, LV, MA, MD, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, MZ,
NO, NZ, PL, PT, RO, RU, SD, SE, SG, SI, SK, SL, TJ, TM,
TR, TT, TZ, UA, UG, UZ, VN, YU, ZA, ZW.

(84) Designated States (*regional*): ARIPO patent (GH, GM,
KE, LS, MW, MZ, SD, SL, SZ, TZ, UG, ZW), Eurasian
patent (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European
patent (AT, BE, CH, CY, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, IE,
IT, LU, MC, NL, PT, SE, TR), OAPI patent (BF, BJ, CF,
CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

Published:

— Without international search report and to be republished
upon receipt of that report.

For two-letter codes and other abbreviations, refer to the "Guid-
ance Notes on Codes and Abbreviations" appearing at the begin-
ning of each regular issue of the PCT Gazette.

(54) Title: **SYSTEMS AND METHODS FOR BUYING AND SELLING LEGAL SERVICES VIA A NETWORK**

(57) Abstract: A system facilitates the purchase of legal services. The system receives a request for purchasing legal service from a buyer via buyer terminal, provides the request to a selected group of firms, and receives replies from firms in response to the request. The system then provides the replies to the buyer terminal, receives a selection from the buyer terminal in response to the replies, and notifies a firm of the selection and an identity of the buyer.

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5 **SYSTEMS AND METHODS FOR BUYING AND SELLING**
 LEGAL SERVICES VIA A NETWORK
 FIELD OF THE INVENTION

 The present invention relates generally to the purchase of items over
an electronic network and, more particularly, to a system and method for
10 creating, maintaining, and operating a forum through which buyers can
 purchase legal services from sellers via an electronic network, such as the
Internet.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

 Traditionally, services have been bought and sold through the
15 interaction of people. Typically, the buy-sell process takes one of two forms:
 (1) a buyer determines the necessary service requirements and contacts one
 or more sellers of these services; or (2) a seller actively solicits the buyer, who
 may or may not be ready to purchase the services.

 When it comes to certain types of services, personal relationships tend
20 to drive the buyer's selection of a seller, not the price or quality of the service.
 Legal services are notoriously expensive. One of the reasons for this is that
 entities seeking such services, e.g., corporations, partnerships, etc., rely
 heavily on personal relationships when selecting attorneys and law firms. As
 a result, these entities may hire an attorney that they like for a particular job
25 but that attorney may not have the best qualifications for that job. They also
 ignore the fact that they may be able to obtain the services of a qualified
 attorney for the job at a lower price.

 A number of corporations have taken steps to reduce legal expenses
by managing legal departments as a cost center. These innovations include
30 incentive compensation for outside counsel and in-house counsel. For
 example, outside counsel compensation may include performance bonuses
coupled with fixed fee rates. In-house counsel may receive additional
bonuses and stock options for reducing legal fees.

 Currently, corporate legal counsel have determined that the best way
35 to reduce legal fees is to reduce the number of firms handling the work and
 require that those firms provide the services at a discount. However,
 corporate legal counsel still rely on personal relationships in selecting the

- 5 short list of firms, ignoring the fact that other qualified firms may be able to do the same work at a lower price.

Another conventional method for reducing legal fees is the so-called "beauty pageant," a process by which law firms compete to provide a company's legal services. In the typical pageant, a corporation contacts
10 specific law firms for proposals to handle specific matters and certain of those law firms respond with proposals. However, these contacts typically stem from personal relationships between the corporate and firm members involved in the pageant. As a result qualified firms willing to do the same work at a cheaper price are ignored.

- 15 Pageants are not efficient or effective in procuring legal services. Those involved in these pageants know that they are extremely time consuming. More importantly, because of the process corporations are not able to seek proposals from all firms or even all of the firms qualified to respond. The corporation does not have the resources to solicit proposals
20 from all these firms or process all of the proposals if many of the firms respond. Additionally, many qualified firms never know about a corporation's requests because they are not included on the short list of firms to whom the request was initially addressed. Of course this means that the corporations may not be getting the best possible return for their investment in legal
25 services.

- Therefore, there is a need to level the playing field for the purchase of services, such as legal services, by allowing buyers to have more control in the buy-sell process, and a need to reduce the expense incurred by sellers to contact buyers ready to purchase their services. In doing so buyers will be
30 able establish market-based pricing for these services that would otherwise follow pricing models established by the service providers.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

- Systems and methods consistent with the present invention address these needs by providing a forum or market through which buyers interact
35 with sellers for the purchase of legal services. Such a forum creates a market for legal services and, thus, market-based pricing for the services.

In accordance with the purpose of the invention as embodied and broadly described herein, a system consistent with the present invention

5 facilitates the purchase of legal services from service providers. The system receives a service request including information reflecting a type of legal service, determines from a set of service providers a select group of service providers capable of satisfying the service request based on stored information associated with the set of service providers, provides the service
10 request to each service provider of the select group of service providers, receives a response to the service request from any service providers from the select group, and outputs to the requester any responses from the service providers. The stored information includes at least an identification of types of legal services associated with each service provider, including for example,
15 expertise of individuals.

In accordance with the purpose of the invention as embodied and broadly described herein, a method consistent with the present invention facilitates the purchase of legal services from service providers. The method includes a set of steps that may be performed in any order. First, service
20 requests are stored, each including information reflecting a type of legal service. A set of service providers are permitted shared access to the stored service requests based on each provider's capability to satisfy a service request reflected in stored information associated with each of the providers. The stored information includes at least an identification of types of legal
25 services associated with each service provider. Responses to the service requests are received from service providers. Each requester is permitted access to responses associated with the requester's service request.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated in and constitute
30 a part of this specification, illustrate an embodiment of the invention and, together with the description, explain the invention. In the drawings,

Fig. 1 is a flow chart of a process used to transact business in a manner consistent with the principles of the present invention;

Fig. 2 is an exemplary diagram of a system in which systems and
35 methods consistent with the present invention may be implemented;

Fig. 3 is a detailed diagram of an exemplary service manager of Fig. 2 configured to manage a forum for the purchase of legal services in a manner consistent with the principles of the present invention;

5 Figs. 4-8 are flow charts of a forum operator program of the service manager of Fig. 3 consistent with one implementation of the present invention; and

Figs. 9-11 include three web pages that display three examples of views of information provided users in a manner consistent with the principles
10 of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The following detailed description of implementations consistent with the present invention refers to the accompanying drawings. The same reference numbers in different drawings identify the same or similar elements.

15 Also, the following detailed description does not limit the invention. Instead, the scope of the invention is defined by the appended claims.

OVERVIEW

Systems and methods consistent with the present invention provide a forum through which buyers and sellers of items, such as products and
20 services (including, for example, legal services) interact. The buyers specify the types of items desired and the sellers submit proposals for providing the items. The buyers select the proposals that meet their requirements and contract with the particular sellers to provide the desired services and/or additional services.

25 The forum is operated using conventional hardware, such as the Internet, web servers, computers, and database management systems. However, the system and methods controlling the operation of the forum are not conventional.

Fig. 1 is a flow chart of a process 100 for managing a forum through
30 which buyers and sellers transact business in a manner consistent with the principles of the present invention. As a first step, a buyer authorized to engage in transactions using the forum creates a Request for Proposal (RFP) (step 105). Software operating on a data processing system accessible via a web server enables the forum and provides an interface, for example, a web
35 page, for the buyer to specify the terms of the RFP. The RFP may include information on the item for which the buyer seeks a seller and qualifications of a seller. Certain information on the buyer, such as identifying information, may also be included in the RFP. The software may obtain this buyer

- 5 information for the RFP from a repository that contains profile information, including buyer identifying information for each buyer permitted to create RFPs. Buyers may provide this profile information using a separate registration process.

- Next, the data processing system notifies selected sellers of the RFP
10 (step 110). Sellers are selected to receive notification of RFPs based on stored information associated with each seller. For example, only sellers qualified to provide a specific service specified in an RFP will be notified of that RFP. Buyers may also specify in the RFP the names of specific sellers to be notified of the RFP or to be excluded from the list of sellers to be notified.
15 Buyers have access to the stored information associated with each seller for the purpose of selecting potential sellers for an RFP.

- Like the buyers, sellers may provide profile information, including identifying information and qualifications using a separate registration process. Because the seller may represent multiple individuals (e.g., lawyers
20 in a law firm) and the qualifications of each individual may be stored with the seller's qualification information, sellers may also be selected based on the qualifications of its associated individuals.

- Also, because of difficulties associated with matching stored qualifications for sellers with the information in RFPs, a conceptual matching
25 algorithm may be applied for this purpose. Conceptual matching refers to extracting conceptual phrases from a source material (e.g., an RFP) and using the phrases as well as the individual words of the source text in locating possible matches for the source text. A taxonomic methodology used in conceptual indexing, which provides a solution to the problems of keyword
30 indexing, is discussed in W. Woods and J. Schmolze, "The KL-ONE Family," Harvard University, Aiken Computation Laboratory, August 3, 1990, and W. Woods, "Understanding Subsumption and Taxonomy: A Framework for Progress," Harvard University, Aiken Computation Laboratory, August 15, 1990, both of which are incorporated herein by reference.

- 35 If the RFP includes an indication that the buyer consents to an optional question and answer (Q&A) period, the data processing system provides a mechanism through which potential sellers can communicate with the buyer using private or public communications (step 115). Private communications

5 are between the buyer and each potential seller interested in responding to the buyer's RFP, whereas public communications are accessible to all of the potential sellers. This way a buyer may answer a specific question and make the answer available to all potential sellers, including the seller that posed the question. Also, the buyer may limit the time period for this Q&A period and,
10 for example, depending upon the questions the buyer may extend the period as needed to respond to questions or concerns about an RFP.

Next, any interested sellers from the selected group submit bids to the buyer via the data processing system (step 120). The data processing system then notifies the buyer of the bid(s) (step 125) and enables a
15 mechanism through which the buyer can now communicate directly with each bidder (i.e., selected seller that responded to an RFP) (step 130).

Once a buyer selects a particular seller, the buyer notifies the data processing system of this selection (step 135), after which the data processing system notifies all of the bidders, including the successful bidder
20 of the completion of the business transaction, i.e., award of the RFP (step 140).

The data processing system may notify buyers and sellers of relevant communications (e.g., new RFPs, new bids, questions, answers, etc.) using electronic mail messages. Other communication mechanisms are also within
25 the scope of the invention, including faxes, audio messages, telephone calls, etc. The notification may include details of the communication, a link to a web page accessible via the data processing system where the details of the communication can be accessed, or simply a message to access the data processing system for new communications.

30 After the buyer selects a seller, a forum operator associated with the data processing system may collect a commission for the service provided by the forum from either the buyer or seller based on the estimated total cost of the item involved in the transaction. Alternatively, the commission may be based on the actual cost of the service. For example, if the fee arrangement
35 calls for a fixed fee, then the commission may be 2% of the fixed fee. If the fee arrangement is an hourly or other rate over the life of the transaction, then the commission may be 2% of the actual amount charged by the law firm

- 5 each time it invoices the client. The commission may be collected using a credit card or other payment method.

Other mechanisms may be used to remit payment for the commission. For example, it may be possible to debit an account associated with the requester for an amount of money equivalent to the commission that the
10 requester committed to compensate the service provider associated with the accepted response. The account may be with a financial institution or with the forum operator. The forum operator may also notify the requester of the commission that the requester committed to compensate the forum operator associated with the accepted response.

- 15 In one implementation, the forum represents a data processing system that assists corporations in retaining legal counsel. Corporations, as buyers, register with the system to submit RFPs. Law firms, as sellers, register to be eligible to respond to RFPs with bids. Although this description refers to corporations and law firms, one skilled in the art will recognize that individuals,
20 partnerships or other entities may be buyers or sellers.

A corporation registers by providing identification and contact information, naming one or more people authorized to post RFPs and receive and accept bids.

- Law firms register by providing identification and contact information,
25 naming one or more people authorized to provide proposals or bids in response to RFPs. Law firms can provide information on practice areas, firm and/or individual expertise, firm size, geographical location, technological capability and other descriptive information, for use to notify them of RFPs of potential interest and for display to potential corporations.

- 30 Fees are paid to the forum operator after the corporation retains a firm using the service of the forum. Those skilled in the art will recognize that this financial arrangement is appealing to corporations and law firms. Other financial arrangements for compensating the forum operator may also be employed. For example, the operator may obtain posting fees for RFPs and
35 proposals, as well as advertising fees from law firms or other entities advertising through the forum.

Corporations post RFPs, each of which may include a title, a summary, a detailed project description, and backup documents and exhibits.

- 5 Corporations list or check off mandatory or preferred qualifications for law firms, including any or all of the following: firm size, years in existence, practice areas, location, references, and the names and experience of the attorneys and other staff who will be assigned to the project. Corporations may also provide the maximum fee they will consider, their budget for the
- 10 project, and other fee structure requirements. Corporations set the opening and closing dates of an optional "question and answer" (Q&A) period and the opening and closing dates for the law firms' submission of bids. All dates can be changed at the corporation's discretion. Corporations may cancel an RFP at any time.
- 15 All RFPs are posted and open to all registered law firms, unless specifically excluded by the corporation by name, geographic area, practice area, and other selected criteria. Accordingly, the corporation can exclude certain firms from an RFP. Registered law firms are notified by, for example, e-mail notification of RFPs in their practice areas as shown in their registration
- 20 information. This is accomplished by matching keywords, phrases and concepts in the text of RFPs to the information supplied by law firms. If a corporation develops a list of law firms and lawyers that suits its needs, it can request that only those "preferred firms" be notified of a particular RFP(s). The preferred list may be provided at registration or for each RFP.
- 25 Corporations may also exclude firms by specifying at registration, firms to be excluded from viewing that corporation's RFPs. Corporations may also specify firms to be excluded from viewing only certain RFPs by providing a list of excluded firms when submitting RFPs. Alternatively, corporations may permit all or selected firms to view its RFPs but simply ignore a firm's bid,
- 30 effectively excluding that firm from providing services to the corporation. Regardless of the approach used, the law firm will not be able to determine if, when or why it was excluded from an RFP.
- The forum has significant flexibility for open or closed RFPs and bidding. All or part of the information in an RFP may be available to all or
- 35 selected firms, or to all or selected corporations; all or part of the information in bids may be available to all or selected corporations, or to all or selected firms. Depending on the situation, for example, a firm may prevent or allow competitors to see pricing information in a bid.

5 The Q&A period enables corporations and law firms to refine their RFPs and proposals, respectively. Law firms can ask questions about or suggest changes in RFPs. Law firms sign their questions or requests for changes or may remain anonymous. Corporations are not obligated to respond. Corporations may answer questions by responding directly to
10 individual lawyers in the law firms or may post questions and/or answers for viewing by all registered law firms. Throughout the Q&A period, corporations can modify their RFPs. At the end of the Q&A period, the RFP includes any answers posted on the site by the corporation available to all participating law firms, are the basis for proposals.

15 Each law firm's proposal must include the information requested in the RFP, including the name of the submitting law firm and contact information, and may include any further information the law firm desires to submit. RFPs may require law firms to submit rates on other than an hourly basis (e.g. a fixed-fee or success fee proposal), the names of the partners, associates and
20 other staff who will be working on the matter and their expertise in the area, and an estimate of the amount of partner, associate and other staff hours involved for the work requested. Each proposal will include the law firm's narrative response, approach to the problem and qualifications.

Corporations may open a dialog with law firms and their authorized
25 representatives at any time and, in doing so, may remain anonymous or may reveal their identity. This allows corporations to ask for revised cost proposals, clarify qualifications, and so forth, and when corporations reveal their identity, allows law firms to start their conflict checks.

By using this forum-based approach, corporations procure legal
30 services using price and quality as the dominant factors without ignoring the continued importance of personal relationships. Competition for work increases and in turn creates competition among the firms to reduce prices. Another significant advantage of this approach is that it permits corporations to rate firms and individual attorneys. By adding this rating information to the
35 stored firm information, other forum members, e.g., corporate users, will be able to take advantage of this rating information and select firms and/or attorneys based on the rating information.

5 SYSTEM ELEMENTS

Fig. 2 is an exemplary diagram of a system 200 in which systems and methods consistent with the present invention may be implemented. The system 200 includes a buyer terminal 210 connected to several seller terminals 220 via a network 230. The system also includes a service
10 manager (SM) 240 connected to the buyer and seller terminals 210 and 220, respectively, via the network 230.

The buyer terminal 210 may include a personal computer, such as an IBM-compatible computer, or the like, with a connection to the network 230. A single buyer terminal 210 has been shown for simplicity. Those skilled in the
15 art will note that the present invention contemplates more than one buyer terminal 210 connected to the network 230. The seller terminals 220 may also include personal computers with connections to the network 230. The network 230 may include the Internet, an intranet, or some equivalent data network. The terminals 210 and 220 may be operating a browser software
20 application such as "Navigator" from Netscape Communications Corp.

Those skilled in the art will be familiar with the operation of such browser applications and the manner in which they are used to access computers, such as servers, accessible via the Internet, an intranet, or some equivalent data network. Alternatively, each of the terminals may be specially
25 equipped with communications software used to communicate via network 230 with SM 240.

An exemplary diagram of a SM 240 consistent with the principles of the present invention is shown in Fig. 3. SM 240 includes a central processing unit (CPU) 245, random access memory (RAM) 250, read-only memory
30 (ROM) 255, at least one data input device 260, data storage device 265, and a network interface 280.

As shown in Fig. 3, CPU 245 is directly coupled to each of the other elements of SM 240, although, in an alternative configuration, network interface 280 may be coupled to CPU 245 via a communication port. CPU
35 245 executes program code (not shown) stored in one or more of RAM 250, ROM 255, and data storage device 265 to carry out the functions and acts described in connection with SM 240. CPU 245 comprises at least one high-speed digital data processor adequate to execute program modules

5 consistent with the invention, such as operating a forum for processing business transactions between buyers and sellers. CPU 245 interacts with RAM 250, ROM 255, and storage device 265 to execute stored program code according to conventional data processing techniques.

10 Data input device 260 permits SM 240 to receive information and, although shown as a single device, may comprise one or more data input devices of various types, such as an alphanumeric keyboard, a numeric keypad, a bar code scanner, a credit card reader, a disk drive, a memory, an electronic communication line, and a wireless transceiver. Input device 260
15 transmits received information to CPU 245 for storage in data storage device 265.

Data storage device 265 preferably comprises a large capacity memory capable of maintaining a program, such as forum operator program 270, and at least one database 272.

20 Although SM 240 is depicted as a single device in the figure, it may be made up of multiple devices, for example, a web server and a separate data processing system. In this configuration the web server would enable communications with SM 240 over the Internet and, in particular, the World Wide Web, and the data processing system would execute forum operator
25 program 270.

In one implementation consistent with the principles of the present invention, program 270 represents program instructions that provide functionality used to operate a forum for enabling corporations as the buyers and law firms as the sellers to transact business, including selecting and
30 contracting with law firms to provide specific legal services. Details on the functionality of the forum operator program 270 are described below.

Database 272 includes a set of tables 272A-272O that forum operator program 270 uses to run the forum, including: a member table 272A that contains information about individuals from corporations and law firms
35 permitted to access to SM 240; a client table 272B that contains information on corporations; a firm table 272C that contains information on law firms; an address table 272D that contains address information for corporations and law firms; a phone table 272E that contains contact information such as

5 telephone numbers or email addresses for corporation and law firm contacts;
a RFP table 272F that contains information on requests for proposals (RFPs);
an attachments table 272G that contains information on attachments or files
associated with RFPs; a download table 272H that contains information on
any downloaded attachments to RFP; a question/response table 272I that
10 contains information on questions and answers exchanged during the Q&A
period associated with each RFP; an active RFP table 272J that contains
information on any RFPs on which a law firm seeks additional information; a
bid table 272K that contains information on responses to RFPs; a
communications table 272L that contains information on all one-on-one
15 negotiations carried on by the corporation and a firm; an actions table 272M
that contains information on events that affect RFP and bids; an archive table
272N that contains information about RFPs and bids that have been purged
from the system; and miscellaneous table 272O that contains information
necessary to maintain other entries in the system.

20 Those skilled in the art will recognize that other database
configurations are also within the scope of the invention as claimed. For
example, the relational database structure of database 272 may be replaced
or augmented by an object oriented database architecture. Additionally, a
different arrangement of tables and relations may be adopted.

25 Member Table 272A

Member table 272A contains information about individuals associated
with corporations and law firms permitted to gain access to SM 240. Each
entry in table 272A includes a field for storing the following information:
MemberId, MemberName, MemberPassword, MemberRole, FirstName,
30 LastName, Email, PrevLoginTime, LoginTime, and TransactionId. The
MemberId represents a unique symbol, which may be a numeric or
alphanumeric code, assigned by the system to each member. The
"MemberName" represents a login name that a member has assigned, and
"MemberPassword" is the password associated with that member. The
35 member may assign a password when registering with the system, or change
the password at any time. Alternatively, the system may assign passwords.

The member's role, after having successfully logging into the system, is
determined from information associated with the "MemberRole" field. The

5 roles are divided into two basic categories: corporations and law firms. The member who is the chief representative of the corporation is assigned the "superclient" role which permits him or her to register other members for the corporation, and reassign roles to members associated with the corporation. Only corporation members assigned the "RFPbidding" role may submit RFPs; 10 these members act as the primary client contact for an RFP and are the only corporation members that may change information associated with that particular RFP. Otherwise, corporation members may read all information associated with any RFP submitted for the client.

The member who is the chief representative of the law firm is assigned 15 the "superlawyer" role which permits him or her to register other members of the law firm, and reassign roles to "lawyer," "biddinglawyer," or the "superlawyer" (when assigning the "superlawyer" role, the assigner gives up the role of "superlawyer" to the assignee). Only lawyer members assigned the "biddinglawyer" role may submit bids; these members act as the primary 20 firm contact for a bid and are the only lawyer members that may change information associated with that particular bid. Otherwise, lawyer members may read all information associated with any bid submitted for the firm.

Non-registered visitors may view a list of registered law firms and corporations. Alternatively, the service may hide information on either 25 according to instructions from the firm or corporation. These visitors may register as either a corporation or a law firm.

A member of a registered law firm may view a list of all RFPs that are available to that firm for bid. This list may include all RFPs, or it may be filtered to reveal only those RFPs that match the firms stated qualifications. 30 No corporation information is visible in these descriptions.

Members of corporations may view only their own RFPs, bids specifically posted to one of their RFPs, and communications between bidders and themselves concerning their own RFPs.

Client Table 272B

35 Client table 272B is comprised of three relations: (1) a corporation relation that provides descriptions of corporations; (2) a member corporation relation that associates members with a particular corporation; and (3) a superclient relation that identifies the member who has the administrative

5 permissions for the corporation. Each entry of a corporation relation reflects a ClientID, which represents an identifier for the corporation, a ClientName, which represents the name of the corporation, a DUNSnumber, which represents a DUNS number identifying the corporation, a ClientEmail, which represents an email address for the corporation, a WebURL, which represents
10 a Web site URL for the corporation, and a TransactionId, which represents an identifier to track any changes to this record type.

The second relation in client table 272B is the MemberClient relation. Each entry in this relation includes the ClientId, MemberId, and TransactionId.

The third relation in client table 272B is the SuperClient relation. Each
15 entry in the SuperClient relation includes the ClientId, MemberId, and TransactionId.

This table 272B may also include account information used to collect a commission when corporations award firms contracts for services, such as credit card or similar payment information. The commission may be
20 computed based on the total value of contracts, for example, a percentage of the value.

Firm Table 272C

Firm table 272C is comprised of four relations: (1) a firm relation, (2) a member firm relation, a super lawyer relation, and an area firm relation. The
25 firm relation describes a particular firm associating some of the attributes of that firm that will be used to qualify a firm to respond to a particular RFP, including information of the firm's practice areas, specialties, and the like, as well as information on specific individuals associated with the firm (e.g., partners, associates, counsel, etc.).

30 Each entry in the firm relation includes a FirmId, which represents an assigned identifier for the firm, a FirmName, which represents the name of the firm, a FirmEmail, which represents the email address for the firm, an MHListing, which represents a Martindale Hubble listing identifier for the firm, a WebURL, which represents the Web site URL for the firm, a StartYear,
35 which represents the year when the firm began practice, a Size, which represents the number of lawyers in firm, a StatePractice indicator, which represents states where the firm practices, a CountryPractice indicator which represents countries outside the US where the firm practices, and a

- 5 TransactionId to track any changes to this record type. Martindale Hubble is the name of a directory of law firms. The Martindale Hubble is available on the Internet at <http://www.martindale.com>. The stored Martindale Hubble listing identifier may be a link or URL for the listing of a firm in the Martindale Hubble directory. For example, a Martindale Hubble listing for the law firm
- 10 CADWALADER, WICKERSHAM & TAFT can be found at http://lawyers.martindale.com/marhub/cite?_ansset=GeHauKO-MsSDUWRARUUARYB-AVUDE-A-WRAREVCZWWDYCRURARU&_startdoc=1&_form=firm.html&maxanswers=500&_session=27b762d0-b635-11d3-8250-8a0c5809aa77.0.1.0.%20.0.0&_state=&wchp=dGLSszV-ISIAS&_md5=c07e6dfac819494159e69869ab11750, which may be stored as the Martindale Hubble listing identifier in firm table 272C.

The member firm relation associates members with a particular firm. Each entry in this relation includes the FirmId, MemberId, and a TransactionId, all of which were explained above.

The super lawyer relation identifies the member who has the administrative permissions for the firm. Each entry in this relation includes the FirmId, MemberId, and a TransactionId, all of which were explained above.

- The areas of practice for a firm are elements of the area firm relation.
- 25 Each entry in this relation includes the FirmId, a PracticeAreaId, and a TransactionId. The PracticeAreaId is an identifier that represents a firm's speciality or specialities. For example, CADWALADER, WICKERSHAM & TAFT specializes in "Capital Markets, Securitization, Corporate Law, Real Estate, Securities, Mergers, Acquisitions and Divestitures, Litigation, Finance,
- 30 Project Finance, Bankruptcy, Banks and Banking, Taxation, Trusts and Estates, Health Care, Environmental Law, Nonprofit Charitable Organizations, Employee Benefits." These practice areas can be identified in the area firm relation using separate entries or using one or more entries with a combination of the listed specialities. Also in the area firm relation is
- 35 information on specific individual lawyers associated with each firm, their specialties, accomplishments, and other qualifications to provide specific services to corporate members. The firm table may also store a firm and/or individual ratings established by corporate members of the forum. This rating

- 5 information permits the corporate members to specify in RFPs that they only want specific firms and/or attorneys having a particular rating (or within a range of the ratings) respond to the RFPs.

Address Table 272D

- Address table 272D includes a collection of address data for firms or
10 corporations. Each entry in this table includes an AddressId, which represents an Address identifier, a Purpose field, which is a code identifying purpose, such as "C" for corporation, "F" for firm, etc., LinkId, which is a linking identifier (ClientId or FirmId), multiple address fields for street and/or post office box number, city, state, and zip code, and a TransactionId.

15 Phone Table 272E

- Phone table 272E stores the telephone number data for members. Each entry in this table includes a PhoneId, a MemberId, a Purpose, PurposeNumber, and a TransactionId. The PhoneId represents an identifier for each entry in the table, and the MemberId, as explained above, represents
20 a unique symbol for each member. The Purpose field is used to indicate the type of telephone number provided in the PurposeNumber field. Types of "Purposes" include home, office, fax, mobile, pager, etc., and each reflects the type of number provided in the PurposeNumber field.

RFP Table 272F

- 25 RFP table 272F contains the information for each RFP and is made up of three relations: RFP relation, FirmAccept relation, and FirmReject relation. Each entry in the RFP relation includes: an RFPId, which represents a unique identifier for each RFP; a ClientId, which represents the ClientId of RFP poster (i.e., corporation); a Title, which represents a title of the RFP selected
30 by the poster; a ClientIdentification, which represents how the corporation is identified to bidding firms (e.g., by name or without a name if the corporation chooses to be anonymous); a Summary, which represents a brief description of the RFP; a URL for a detailed description of the RFP; a QuesOpenDate, which represents an opening date for the Q&A period (when this field is blank
35 the corporation does not permit a Q&A period); a QuesClosingDate, which represents the closing date for Q&A period; an OpeningDate, which is when bidding may begin; a ClosingDate, which is when bidding must be complete; a FeeStructure, which represents fee structures that are preferred, required, or

5 acceptable to the posting client (e.g., No preference, Fixed fee, Hourly, Hourly
with Cap, Success, Other); an HourlyCap, which represents an optional
maximum hourly fee; an OtherFee, which represents an optional string when
FeeStructure is Other; a MaximumBid, which represents an optional dollar
amount maximum; an ExpectedBid, which represent an optional budgeted
10 amount for the RFP; an AreaOfPractice indicator, which represents optional
area of practice indexes preceded by "M" (for mandatory) or "P" (for preferred);
a FirmSize, which represents an optional firm size index preceded by M or P;
a Location, which represents an optional firm location in same state as client
preceded by M or P; a YearsInPractice, which represents an optional
15 minimum number of years in practice preceded by M or P; an
OtherPreferences for any other preferences (such as information on preferred
or required qualifications of specific lawyers in a firm); a BidAccepted field for
indicating the posting corporation's preference for accepting responsive bids
(e.g., "0" for "accept any bid" or "1" for "accept only bids from firms satisfying
20 mandatory requirements"); a PostingDateTime for the Date/time when RFP
was originally created; a ModifiedDateTime for the Date/time when RFP was
last modified; a Status field for status information associated with the RFP
(e.g., "C" for creation stage; "B" for bidding stage; "W" for withdrawn; "D" for
deleted; "S" for successful bid accepted; "F" for fee bid accepted); a BidId,
25 which represents the identifier of a successful bid; a ComputedFee for the
computed fee for the successful bid; a PaymentMethod field for information on
how the poster will pay for the services (e.g., Visa, MasterCard, Amex, Bill), a
PaymentRecvd field for information on the Date/Time when payment was
received; and a TransactionId to track any changes to this record type.

30 The title field is the string employed when a list of RFPs is prepared.
When a member of a law firm asks for more details of an RFP in the bidding
stage, the summary field is displayed along with the opening and closing
dates for bids and questions, and the requirements for qualifying firms.

The FirmAccept relation lists the firms that are permitted to bid. If this
35 list exists for the RFP, only those firms will be notified of the RFP posting.
Each entry in this relation includes an RFP Id, which represents the identifier
of an RFP; a FirmId, which represents an identifier of firm requested for bid;
and a TransactionId.

- 5 The FirmReject relation lists the firms that will not be permitted to bid. Firms on this list will not be apprised of the posting of the RFP nor will they be permitted to download any information associated with the RFP. Each entry in this relation includes an RFP Id, a FirmId, and a TransactionId.

Attachments Table 272G

- 10 Attachments table 272G contains information that further explain an RFP or bid in response to an RFP. There may be as many attachments to an RFP or bid as is necessary. When a list of attachments associated with a particular RFP or bid is created, the attachment name string is employed which can be a phrase that identifies the attachment. To help estimate the
- 15 time to download an attachment, the size of the file is also present in the relation. Each entry in this table includes an AttachmentId, which represents an identifier for an attachment; an AttachmentType, which represents the type of attachment (e.g., "C" for corporation attachment to RFP; "F" for firm attachment to bid); an RFP Id or BidId; and AttachmentName, which
- 20 represents an external name for an attachment; an AttachmentSize, which is the size (e.g., bytes) of an attachment; and a TransactionId.

Download Table 272H

- Download table 272H is used when either a company downloads attachments to an RFP or a firm downloads attachments to a bid. In
- 25 particular, this table is used to record all download events. A corporation that has posted an RFP can find out how many times the supporting documentation for that RFP has been downloaded. Each entry in this table includes a DownloadId; a DownloadType, which represents the type of download (e.g., "C" for corporation download of bid; "F" for firm download of
- 30 RFP); a LinkId, which is either an RFP Id or BidId; a ClientFirmId, which is an identifier for either a corporation or firm; a MemberId, which is an identifier of the member requesting the download; a DateTime for when information was downloaded; a DownloadType for information on data downloaded (e.g., RFP, Bid, Question, Response); and a TransactionId.

- 35 Question/Response Table 272I

 A corporation may open a question and answer session to be held while law firms consider an RFP. Questions can then be posed by any law firm. Initially the question is viewable only by the corporation posting the RFP

- 5 and the questioning firm. At the discretion of the corporation, all firms may view the question.

A response made by the corporation can be captured by the response relation. The response will be private to the requesting law firm unless the corporation expressly permits all firms to view the answer. There may be
10 more than one response posted to a particular question.

Anonymity of the questioning firm may be protected when a question/answer is made available to other members.

This table is made of two relations, Question and Response. Each entry of the Question relation includes: a QuestionId, which represent a
15 unique identifier for each question; an RFP Id, which represents the RFP associated with the posted question; a FirmId, which represents firm posting a question; a MemberId, which identifies the member posting the question; a Viewable code for distinguishing between users permitted to view a question (e.g., "0" for viewable to all, no restriction; "1" for not viewable to other than
20 corporation and posting firm); a DateTime to record the date/time when the question was posted; the text of the question; and a TransactionId.

Each entry of the Response relation includes a ResponseId, which represents a unique identifier for each response to a question; the QuestionId associated with the question to which a response is provided; a DateTime to
25 record the date/time when the response was posted; Viewable code for distinguishing between users permitted to view a question (e.g., "0" for viewable to all, no restriction; "1" for not viewable to other than corporation and posting firm); the text of the response; and a TransactionId.

ActiveRFP Table 272J

- 30 As corporations post RFPs, law firms are notified of those that are for services in their areas of practice. When a firm wishes to receive more information about an RFP, a member associated with firm will place that RFP on the firm's active RFP list. Placing the RFP there permits the firm to download all information concerning the RFP. The ActiveRFP relation
35 maintains this information. Each entry includes a MemberId; an RFP Id; DateTime to record the date/time the firm added an RFP to its active list; and a TransactionId.

5 Proposal Table 272K

When a firm wishes to answer an RFP, the system constructs an entry in the proposal (bid) relation. This relation contains the identifier of the RFP to which the firm is responding as well as the fee type and amount. In particular, each entry in this relation includes: a BidId; an RFPIId; a FirmId; a MemberId; 10 a DateTime for when the bid was posted; a SuccessFee to indicate whether the bid fee is contingent upon success; a Fee to indicate the total fee associated with bid when not contingent upon success; a short summary of the firms qualifications and the proposed work; a status of bid (e.g., "C" for created; "P" for posted; "A" for accepted; "E" for eliminated; "N" for 15 Negotiating); and a TransactionId.

Correspondence Table 272L

Correspondence table 272L captures all negotiations carried on by the corporation and firm. Each party can view all contents of the correspondence. Once the correspondence has been posted, it remains in a read-only state to 20 both parties. Each entry includes: a CorrespondenceId, which is a unique identifier for each entry, a BidId; a MemberId; a Viewable code (e.g., "0" for anonymous; "1" for corporation name viewable); a status (e.g., "C" for created; "P" posted), a DateTime when correspondence was posted; the text of the response; and a TransactionId.

25 Actions Table 272M

This table is used to record the events that affect RFP and bids. These actions are recorded by the system when a significant event affecting the bidding process for a client or firm occur. Action types include events such as firm responds to an RFP with bid, firm changes contents of a bid, firm submits 30 a question to an RFP, firm posts a correspondence to an RFP/bid, corporation changes RFP, corporation answers a question, corporation posts a correspondence to a RFP/bid; corporation accepts bid. Each entry in this table includes: an ActionId; a DateTime when the action was recorded; a ToWhom field information on the party affected by the action (e.g., "C" for 35 corporation; "F" for firm); a LinkId for the ClientId or FirmId; an RFPIId or BidId (e.g., RFPIId for Firm; BidId for Client); an ActionTypeId; and a TransactionId.

5 Archive Table 272N

This table contains information about RFPs and bids that have been purged from the system. Each entry includes an ArchiveId (the archive files are compressed into a container called by this identifier); a DateTime of when archive action was taken; an ArchiveType ("0" for successful bid; "1" for
10 Expired RFP; "2" for withdrawn RFP); a ClientId for the corporation that provided the RFP; a FirmId for the firm winning the competition; a FeeType; a TotalFee amount; Service Fee paid to the system provider; and a TransactionId.

Miscellaneous Table 272O

15 Miscellaneous table maintains other relations in the system. For example, an AreaOfPractice relation contains information on the areas of legal practice, a SizeOfPractice relation contains the level breakdown for the size of practices, an ActionType relation links the ActionTypeID to a displayable string, and the NextIds relation contains the values of the next
20 identifiers to be assigned by the system for various relations in the system.

Each entry in the AreaOfPractice relation includes an PracticeAreaId; an identifier for area of practice; a description of the practice area; and a TransactionId.

Each entry in the SizeOfPractice relation includes a SizeOfPracticeld
25 for the identifier for size of practice; a LawyerCount for the maximum number of lawyers for a SizeOfPracticeld; and a TransactionId. This way the firm relations table may use identifiers to refer to areas of practice and size of the firm.

Each entry in the ActionType relation includes an ActionTypeId for the
30 identifier for each action type; a description field; and a TransactionId.

 FORUM PROCESSING

Figs. 4-8 depict flow charts of steps embodying one implementation of forum operator program 270 executed by CPU 245 in accordance with the principles of the present invention. Beginning in Fig. 4, SM 240 receives an
35 access request from a client computer, such as buyer terminal 210 associated with a corporation member or one of the seller terminals 220 associated with a law firm member (step 410). In a web-based implementation this request may include a request in response to a user inputting into a browser

5 application operating on the client computer a Uniform Resource Locator (URL) associated with SM 240. Upon receipt of an access request, SM 240 generates one or more "web pages" with various options and provides the page(s) to the client computer for display to the user using the browser (step 420). The "web pages" may be generated using hypertext markup language
10 or an equivalent protocol. Also, information travels in both directions in that users can input information using web pages as forms and transmit the information to SM 240.

Options on the initial page(s) include information request, registration, and login (440, 450, 460 respectively). Upon selection of one of these options
15 by the user, SM 240 follows a specific set of operations illustrated in the flow charts of Figs. 4-6.

Processing Information Requests

When the user selects the information request option (step 430, 440), SM 240 simply generates a page with any selected information and provides
20 the page to the client computer for display (step 445). This way users can obtain additional information on the operations of SM 240 and, in particular, how to register, post RFPs, post bids, and otherwise engage in activities using SM 240.

Processing Registrations

25 When the user selects the registration option (step 430, 450), SM 240 generates a registration page and provides the page to the client computer for display (step 510, Fig. 5). The page permits the user to indicate whether he/she represents a corporation or law firm. Upon selection of one of these options (step 520), SM 240 generates a specific corporation or law firm page
30 and provides the appropriate page to the client computer for display (steps 530 and 540, respectively). After the user completes the form with information and returns that information to SM 240, SM 240 verifies that the information is accurate and/or complete (step 550 for corporations and step 560 for law firms). This verification process ensures that only qualified
35 corporations and law firms are permitted to use the system. Qualified entities provide the data required to populate the non-optional fields of client and firm tables 272B, 272C of database 272. Other forms of verification may be used, including making sure that only corporations or firms meeting predetermined

- 5 criteria, such as size or value, use the system. These criteria may thus be used to ensure certain standards within the forum.

Upon verification, SM 240 updates the client or firm table 272B, 272C of database 272 (step 570 for corporations and step 580 for law firms), accordingly.

10 Processing Login Requests

- When the user selects the login option (step 430, 460), SM 240 generates a login page and provides the page to the client computer for display (step 610, Fig. 6). The login page preferably includes fields through which a user can input login information, including a member name and
- 15 password. SM 240 will then determine whether the user is registered to use the system and, if so, permit access to the system based on the member's role (corporate member or law firm member). For corporation members SM 240 generates and display one or more pages with options available to that member's corporation (step 630). For law firm member SM 240 generates
- 20 and display one or more pages with options available to that member's law firm (step 640).

Corporation member options are represented by the steps in the flow chart of Fig. 7, whereas law firm member options are represented by the steps in the flow chart of Fig. 8.

25 Corporation Member Processing

- The corporation member options include update profile 720, law firm search 730, and list RFPs 740, each of which corresponds to a different operation of SM 240. Those skilled in the art will recognize that conventional techniques and program instructions may be used to generate these options
- 30 and respond to member commands to perform operations in response to the selection of an option. For example, SM 240 may present the options to members in the form of button on a display screen such that when the member selects a particular button by, for example, using a mouse or other input device to point to the button and click on a mouse button, SM 240
- 35 performs operations associated with the selected option.

When the member selects the update profile option (step 710, 720), SM 240 accesses client table 272B and populates a page with information associated with the member's corporation. The member may then modify the

- 5 profile information and submit the information with any modifications to SM 240 to update database 272. As suggested above, SM 240 may limit the capability of members of a corporation to modify the corporation's profile to members satisfying the superclient relation.

- When the member selects the law firm search option (step 710, 730),
- 10 SM 240 generates a page for the member to input search criteria to search firm table 272C. Those skilled in the art will recognize that conventional search algorithms may be used, including text matching, or concept matching techniques. SM 240 accesses table 272C, applies the search criteria and algorithm, and returns a list of law firms, if any, that satisfy the criteria in
- 15 accordance with the algorithm.

- For example, SM 240 may provide the member with a page that includes specific fields and available attributes for each field using a known pull-down menu technique. The member completes particular fields with selected attributes and transmits that field/attribute information to SM 240.
- 20 SM 240 in turn accesses table 272C, selects law firms that satisfy the attributes, and returns to the member a page including a list of law firms, if any, that satisfy the attributes. Entries on this list may be used as links to additional detailed information from table 272C so that if the member selects a particular link, SM 240 generates another page with information on the firm
- 25 extracted from table 272C and provide this law firm detail page to the member. If no firms are found then an appropriate message may be provided to the member.

- When the member selects the list RFP option (step 710, 740), SM 240 generates a page including a list identifying RFPs associated with the
- 30 member's corporation. The list may be limited to RFPs that the corporation has not yet awarded or it may include all RFPs that have not yet been archived. An example of such a page 900 is shown in Fig. 9. As shown in Fig. 9, from this page the member may view the details of an RFP by selecting an RFP and the view option 905. In the figure the filled circle next to
- 35 the RFP titled "Federal Court Commercial Litigation" indicates that the member has selected this RFP.

The details of an RFP may be modified using the same procedure for viewing and selecting the modify/create option 910. If no RFP on the list has

5 been selected but the member selected the modify/create option 910, SM 240 provides a page with a blank RFP template for the member to input information for a new RFP.

 An RFP may be deleted using a procedure similar to that used to for an viewing RFP, except the member selects the delete option 915. As
10 suggested, the corporation may only permit certain members to create and delete RFPs.

 Another option available to members of the corporation is the bid option 920. This option, when selected, provides details to the member on any bids that law firms have submitted in response to an RFP. Bids
15 associated with an RFP may be viewed by using a procedure similar to that used to for viewing an RFP, except the member selects the bids option 920.

 When selected with a particular RFP, the Q&A option 925 permits the member participate in the Q&A session associated with that RFP. For example, the member may view the questions and answers, respond to new
20 questions, or modify existing answers. After the Q&A period, which is an option selected by the corporation, the corporation and law firms may engage in negotiations over a particular RFP and responsive bid, correspondence option 930 is used for members to view the correspondence, respond to new issues posted by the law firm, or modify previous responses.

25 Finally, the member can select the logout option 935 to logout of the system.

 As shown in Fig. 9, next to each of the listed RFPs is a stage, which refers to the status of the RFP. For example, the listed RFP "Federal Court Commercial Litigation" has at least one bid; the listed RFP "Age
30 Discrimination Class Action Defense" has been awarded; and the listed RFP "Copyright Infringement Defense" is in the Q&A period.

Law Firm Member Processing

 Law firm member options are depicted in the flow chart of Fig. 8. Options available to a law firm member include update profile 820, active bids
35 processing 830, and active RFP processing 840. The difference between the active bids processing 830 and the active RFPs processing 840 is mainly the stage of the listed RFPs. The RFPs listed on the active bids page are those that have passed any Q&A period for which the member's law firm has

5 submitted a bid. In contrast, the active RFPs pages lists RFPs for which the member's law firm has not yet submitted a bid.

When the member selects the update profile option (step 810, 820), SM 240 firm table 272C and populates a page with information associated with the member's law firm. The member may then modify then profile
10 information and submit the information with any modifications to SM 240 to update database 272. As suggested above, SM 240 may limit the capability of members of a law firm to modify the corporation's profile to members satisfying the superlawyer relation.

When the member selects the active bids option (step 810, 830), SM
15 240 generates a page with a list of the member's law firm's active bids, in particular the list includes information on RFPs for which the law firm has submitted a bid and at least a date on which each bid was submitted. An example of such a page 1000 is shown in Fig. 10.

As shown in Fig. 10, from this page 1000 the member may view the
20 details of active bids by selecting a bid by filling in the circle next to the bid on the list and selecting the view option 1005. The details of a bid may be modified using the same procedure for viewing and selecting option 1010. The same option 1010 may also be used to create a new bid by selecting the option without identifying a particular bid on the list. A bid may be deleted
25 using a procedure similar to that used to for viewing a bid, except the member selects the delete option 1015. As suggested, the law firm may only permit certain members to create, modify and delete bids. Option 1020 is used to submit a bid.

After any Q&A period for an RFP, which is option selected by the
30 corporation, the corporation and law firm may engage in negotiations over a particular RFP and responsive bid, communications option 1025 is used for law firm members to view the communications, respond to new issues posted by the corporation, or modify previous responses.

Finally, the member can select the logout option 1030 to logout of the
35 system.

As shown in Fig. 10, next to each of the listed active bids is summary information, including fee and submission date, and a stage, which refers to the status of the bid. For example, the listed bid for an "Age Discrimination

- 5 Class Action Defense" matter is in the bid stage and the law firms bid for a "Copyright Infringement Defense" matter has been awarded.

When the member selects the active RFPs option (step 810, 840), SM 240 generates a page with a list of RFPs for which the law firm may submit a responsive bid. As discussed above, RFPs on list are filtered in the sense
10 that the list includes only RFPs that the corporations want the law firm to view. The filter can be based on qualifications of the law firm or any of its attorneys, or it can reflect the corporation's specific selection. An example of such a page 1100 is shown in Fig. 11.

As shown in Fig. 11, from this page 1100 the member may view the
15 details of active RFPs by selecting an RFP by filling in the circle next to the RFP information on the list and selecting the view option 1105. A similar procedure may be used to create a bid in response to an RFP. If an RFP is selected by filling in the circle next to the RFP information on the list and the member selects the create option 1110, SM 240 provides a page with a blank
20 bid template for the member to input information for a new bid. If the law firm is still working on its bid, it is not yet considered an active bid and, therefore, the bid still appears in page 1100. The member can modify the terms of such a bid by selecting the RFP by filling in the circle next to the RFP information on the list and selecting option 1110.

25 A bid may be deleted using a procedure similar to that used to for viewing a bid, except the member selects the delete option 1115. As suggested, the law firm may only permit certain members to create, modify and delete bids.

A corporation may specify that a particular RFP will have a Q&A period
30 during which law firms and the corporation can exchange questions and answers about the RFP. If an RFP has such a Q&A period associated with it, the member may participate in the Q&A by selecting the RFP and the Q&A option 1120.

After any Q&A period for an RFP, which is an option selected by the
35 corporation, the corporation and law firm may engage in negotiations over a particular RFP and responsive bid, communications option 1125 is used for law firm members to view the communications, respond to new issues posted by the corporation, or modify previous responses.

5 Finally, the member can select the logout option 1130 to logout of the system.

 As shown in Fig. 11, next to each of the listed active RFPs is information on the stage, which refers to the status of the bid. For example, the listed bid for an "Age Discrimination Class Action Defense" matter is in the bid stage, the "Copyright Infringement Defense" matter has been awarded,
10 and the "International Joint Venture - Software Developer" RFP is available to the law firm for a bid and is in the Q&A period.

CONCLUSION

 The systems and methods consistent with the present invention
15 provide a forum through which buyers can purchase legal services from a variety of sellers. The present invention levels the playing field by giving buyers more power than they presently have in the buy-sell process.

 The foregoing description of preferred embodiments of the present invention provides illustration and description, but is not intended to be
20 exhaustive or to limit the invention to the precise form disclosed. Modifications and variations are possible in light of the above teachings or may be acquired from practice of the invention. The scope of the invention is defined by the claims and their equivalents.

 For example, the RFP approval process has been described as a
25 group of sellers receiving an RFP and separately determining whether to approve or reject it. Alternatively, SM 240 may contain a database of previously generated replies from the sellers. SM 240 may query the database using the terms of the RFP and obtain one or more replies to present to the buyer. Also, although aspects of the present invention are
30 described as being stored in memory, one skilled in the art will appreciate that these aspects may also be stored on or read from other computer-readable media, such as secondary storage devices, like hard disks, floppy disks, or CD-Rom; a carrier wave from the Internet; or other forms of RAM or ROM.

 Although aspects of the invention are described in the context of
35 providing legal services in particular, the invention is not so limited. Other types of services may be procured using the same forum-based approach, particularly services that, conventionally, rely on personal relationships for the

- 5 : selection of service providers. The forum-based approach may be used in the mortgage banking and investment industries.

5

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS

1. A computer-implemented method for procuring legal services, comprising:
receiving a service request including information reflecting a type of legal service;
10 determining from a set of service providers a select group of service providers capable of satisfying the service request based on stored information associated with the set of service providers, the stored information including at least an identification of types of legal services associated with each service provider;
15 providing the service request to each service provider of the select group of service providers;
receiving a response to the service request from any service providers from the select group; and
outputting to the requester any responses from the service providers.
- 20 2. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
receiving from the requester an acceptance of one of the responses, the acceptance representing a commitment to compensate the service provider associated with the accepted response a particular amount of money for legal services associated with the service request.
- 25 3. The method of claim 2, further comprising:
calculating a percentage of the amount of money that the requester committed to compensate the service provider associated with the accepted response.
4. The method of claim 3, further comprising:
30 debiting an account associated with the requester for an amount of money equivalent to the calculated percentage of the amount of money that the requester committed to compensate the service provider associated with the accepted response.
5. The method of claim 3, further comprising:
35 notifying the requester of the calculated percentage of the amount of money that the requester committed to compensate the service provider associated with the accepted response.
6. The method of claim 4, further comprising:

5 receiving payment from the requester equivalent to the calculated percentage that the requester committed to compensate the service provider associated with the accepted response.

7. A computer-implemented method for procuring legal services, comprising:
10 storing service requests including information reflecting a type of legal service;
permitting shared access to the stored service requests by a set of service providers capable of satisfying the service requests based on stored information associated with the set of service providers, the stored information
15 including at least an identification of types of legal services associated with each service provider; and
receiving responses to the service requests from the service providers.

8. A computer-implemented method of procuring legal services
20 using a network, comprising:
providing an interface in the network for entities to obtain legal services from service providers;
permitting users associated with entities access to the interface to specify requests identifying legal services;
25 permitting users associated with the service providers limited access to the interface based on the requests for legal services; and
receiving a response to one of the requests for legal services, referred to as an accepted request, from at least one of the users associated with one of the service providers, the response representing a commitment to provide
30 the legal services identified in the accepted request.

9. A computer-implemented method for procuring legal services, comprising:
determining from a set of service providers a select group of service providers capable of satisfying a service request based on stored information
35 associated with the set of service providers, the stored information including at least an identification of types of legal services associated with each service provider;

5 notifying each service provider of the select group of service providers
about the service request;

receiving a response to the service request from at least one of the
service providers from the select group; and

10 notifying a requester associated with the service request of the
response.

10. A system for procuring legal services, comprising:

a memory containing program instructions for (i) receiving a service
request including information reflecting a type of legal service, (ii) determining
from a set of service providers a select group of service providers capable of
15 satisfying the service request based on stored information associated with the
set of service providers, the stored information including at least an
identification of types of legal services associated with each service provider,
(iii) providing the service request to each service provider of the select group
of service providers, (iv) receiving a response to the service request from any
20 service providers from the select group, and (v) outputting to the requester
any responses from the service providers; and

a processor configured to execute the program instructions.

11. The system of claim 10, further including in the memory
instructions for receiving from the requester an acceptance of one of the
25 responses, the acceptance representing a commitment to compensate the
service provider associated with the accepted response a particular amount of
money for legal services associated with the service request.

12. The system of claim 11, further including in the memory
instructions for calculating a percentage of the amount of money that the
30 requester committed to compensate the service provider associated with the
accepted response.

13. The system of claim 12, further including in the memory
instructions for debiting an account associated with the requester for an
amount of money equivalent to the calculated percentage of the amount of
35 money that the requester committed to compensate the service provider
associated with the accepted response.

14. The system of claim 12, further including in the memory
instructions for notifying the requester of the calculated percentage of the

5 amount of money that the requester committed to compensate the service provider associated with the accepted response.

15. The system of claim 12, further including in the memory instructions for receiving payment from the requester equivalent to the calculated percentage that the requester committed to compensate the
10 service provider associated with the accepted response.

16. A system for procuring legal services, comprising:
a memory containing instructions for causing the system to (i) store service requests including information reflecting a type of legal service, (ii)
15 permit shared access to the stored service requests by a set of service providers capable of satisfying the service requests based on stored information associated with the set of service providers, the stored information including at least an identification of types of legal services associated with each service provider, and (iii) receiving responses to the service requests from the service providers; and

20 a processor configured to execute the instructions.

17. A system for contracting for legal services, comprising:
a memory containing instructions for causing the system to (i) determine from a set of service providers a select group of service providers capable of satisfying a service request based on stored information
25 associated with the set of service providers, the stored information including at least an identification of types of legal services associated with each service provider, (ii) notify each service provider of the select group of service providers about the service request, (iii) receive a response to the service request from at least one of the service providers from the select group, and
30 (iv) notify a requester associated with the service request of the response; and

a processor configured to execute the instructions.

18. A system for matching sellers with buyers for the purpose of engaging in a business transaction, comprising:
35 a set of seller terminals;
a set of buyer terminals; and

- 5 at least one service manager configured to receiving a request
including information reflecting a type of item from a buyer associated with
one of the buyer terminals;
- determining from a set of service providers a select group of sellers
capable of providing the item based on stored information associated with the
10 set of sellers, the stored information including at least an identification of types
of items associated with each seller;
- providing information corresponding to the request to each seller of the
select group of sellers;
- receiving a response to the request from at least one seller from the
15 select group via the seller terminal associated with the responding seller; and
outputting to the buyer information corresponding to the response.
19. A method for procuring legal services, comprising:
- (a) establishing an electrical communication between a service system
and a plurality of service requesters;
- 20 (b) establishing an electrical communication between the service
system and a plurality of service providers;
- (c) transmitting to the service system from each of the plurality of
service requesters instructions for notifying service providers of requests for
legal services,
- 25 (d) the service system receiving profile information from the plurality of
service providers and categorizing the service providers based on the profile
information;
- (e) selectively transmitting to the plurality of service requesters from the
service system profile information for service providers; and
- 30 (f) selectively transmitting to a select group of the service providers
information corresponding to each of the requests for legal services, the
selected group of service providers determined based on at least one of (i) the
instructions associated with a request and (ii) a capability of satisfying the
service request determined by the service system from stored information
35 including at least an identification of types of legal services associated with
each service provider and individuals associated therewith.
20. A computer-implemented method for procuring legal services,
comprising:

5 receiving a service request including information reflecting a type of legal service;

determining from a set of service providers a select group of service providers capable of satisfying the service request based on stored information associated with the set of service providers, the stored information
10 including at least information reflecting qualifications of individuals associated with the service providers to perform specific legal services;

providing the service request to each service provider of the select group of service providers;

receiving a response to the service request from any service providers
15 from the select group; and

outputting to the requester any responses from the service providers.

21. A computer-implemented method for procuring legal services, comprising:

receiving a service request;

20 matching concepts reflected in the service request with concepts associated with stored information reflecting types of legal services associated with a set of service providers to select a group of service providers capable of satisfying the service request;

providing access to information corresponding to the service request to
25 each service provider of the select group;

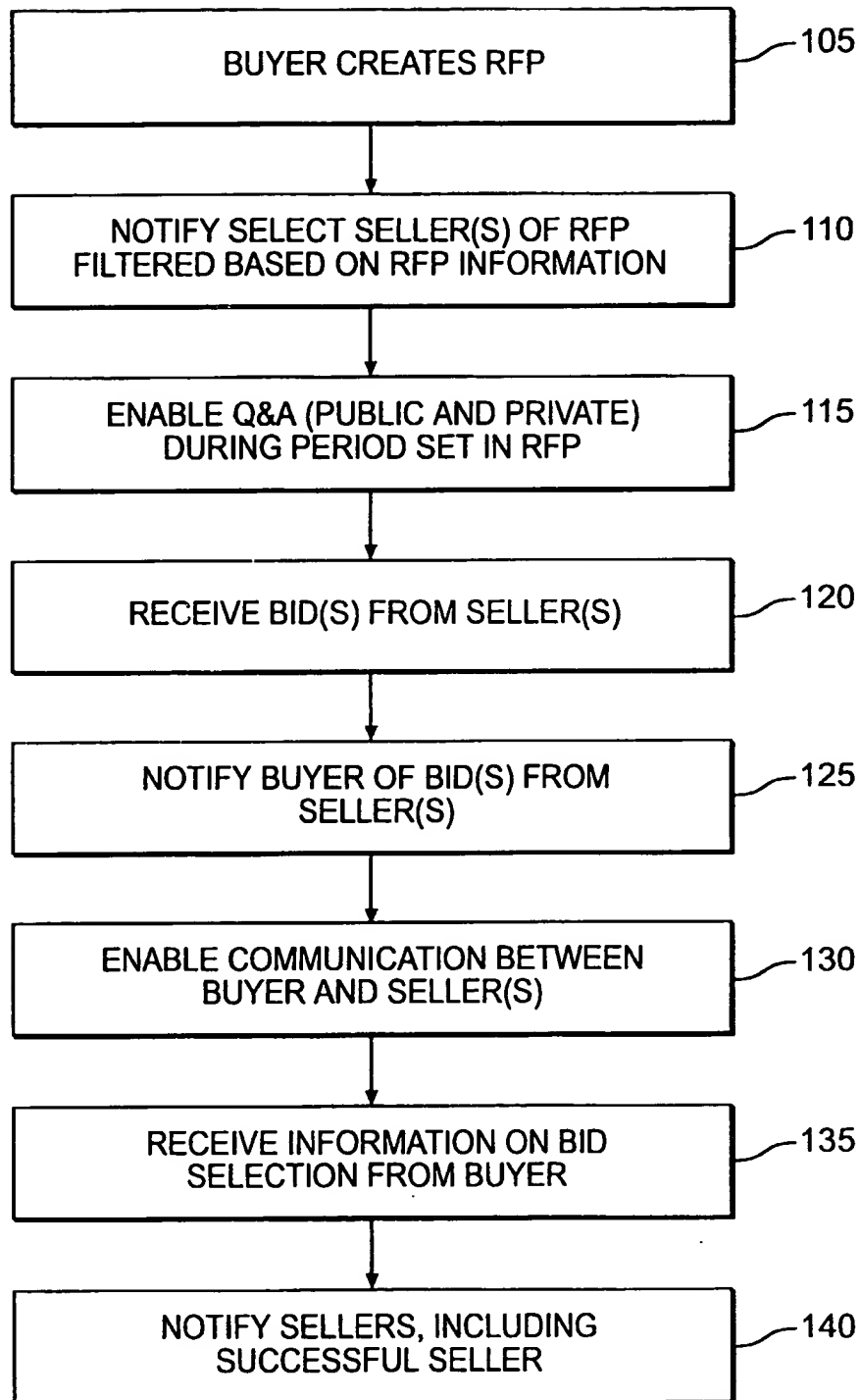
receiving a response to the service request from at least one of the service providers from the select group; and

notifying a requester associated with the service request of the response.

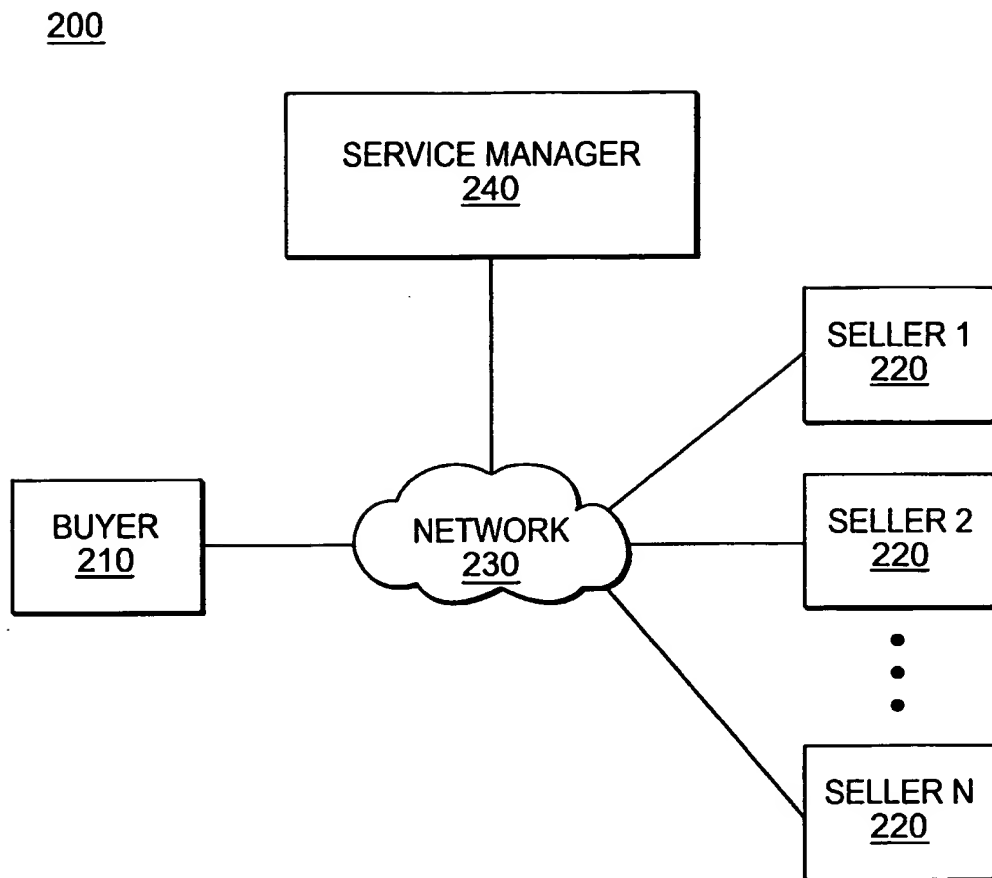
30 22. The method of claim 22, wherein the matching step includes the substep of:

accessing a database containing information reflecting qualifications of individuals associated with the service providers to perform specific legal services.

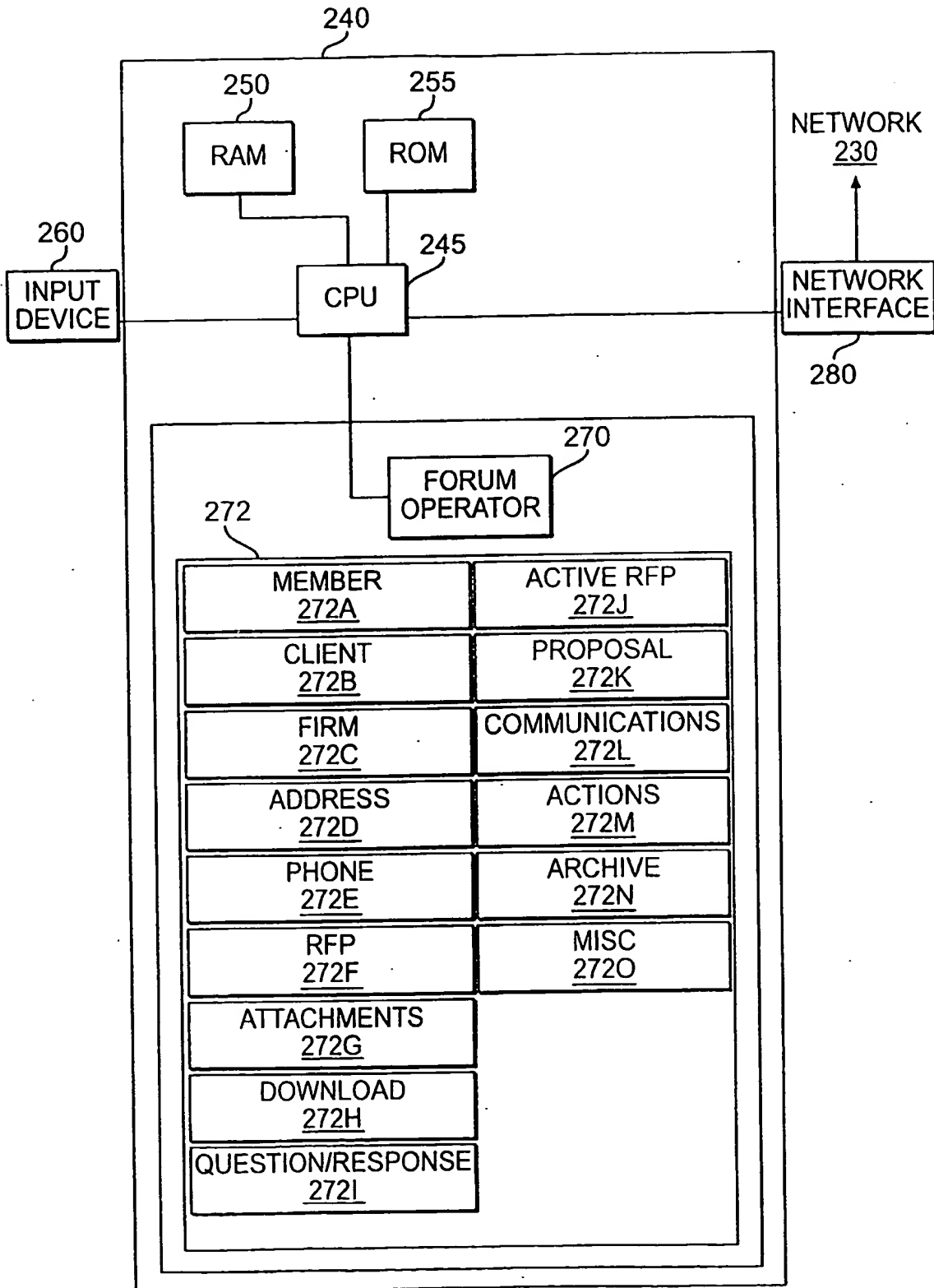
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100**FIG. 1**

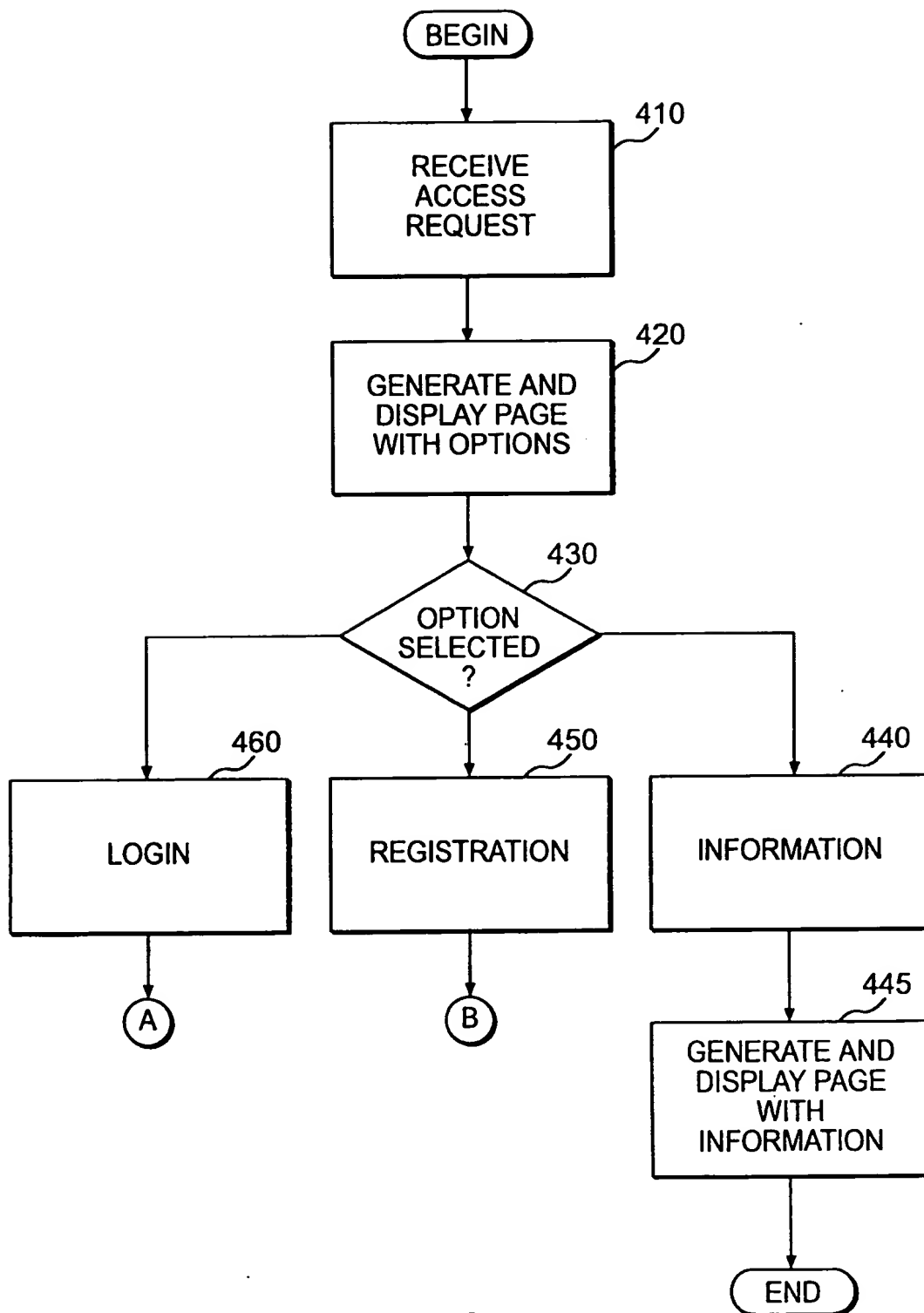
2/11

**FIG. 2**

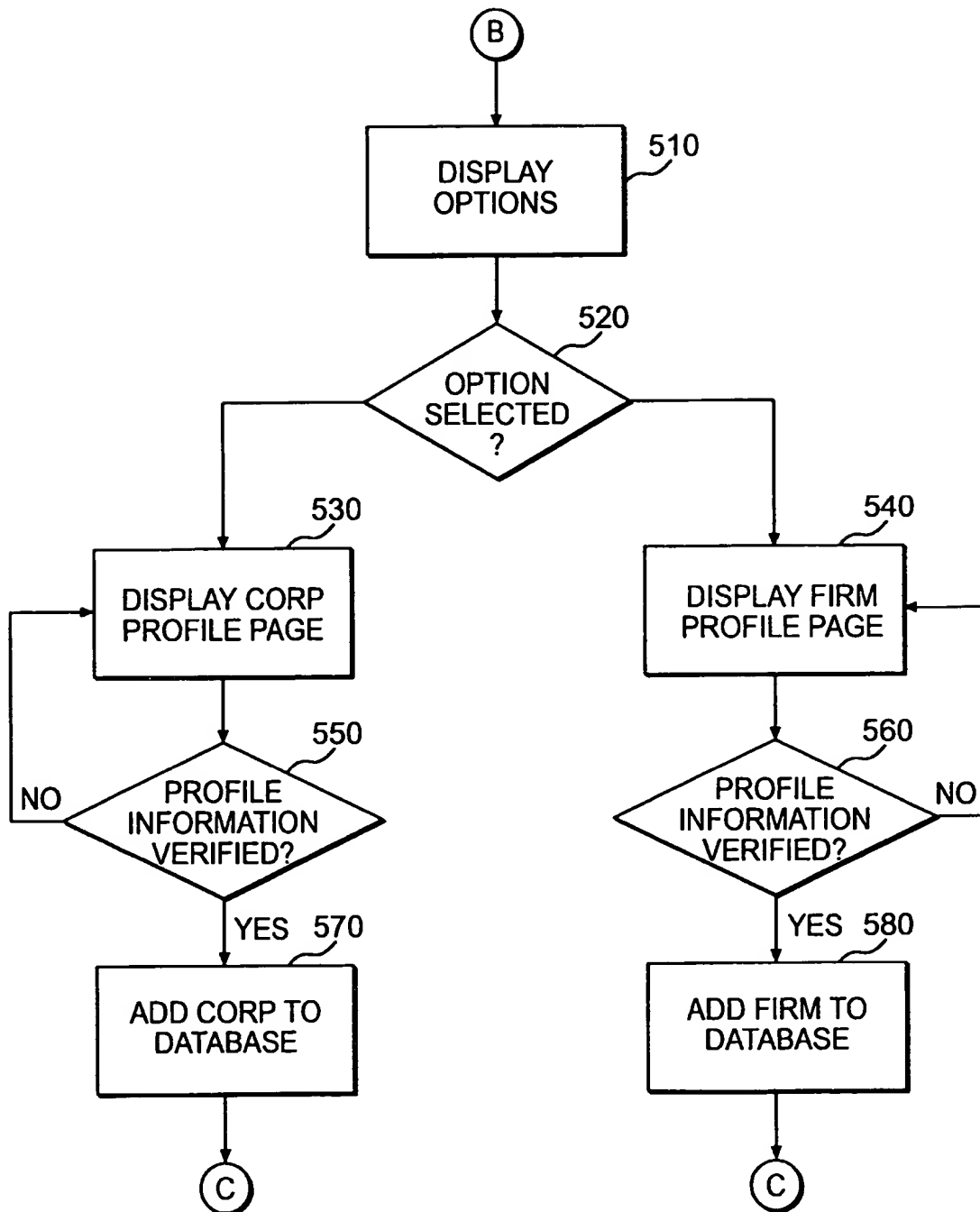
3/11

**FIG. 3**

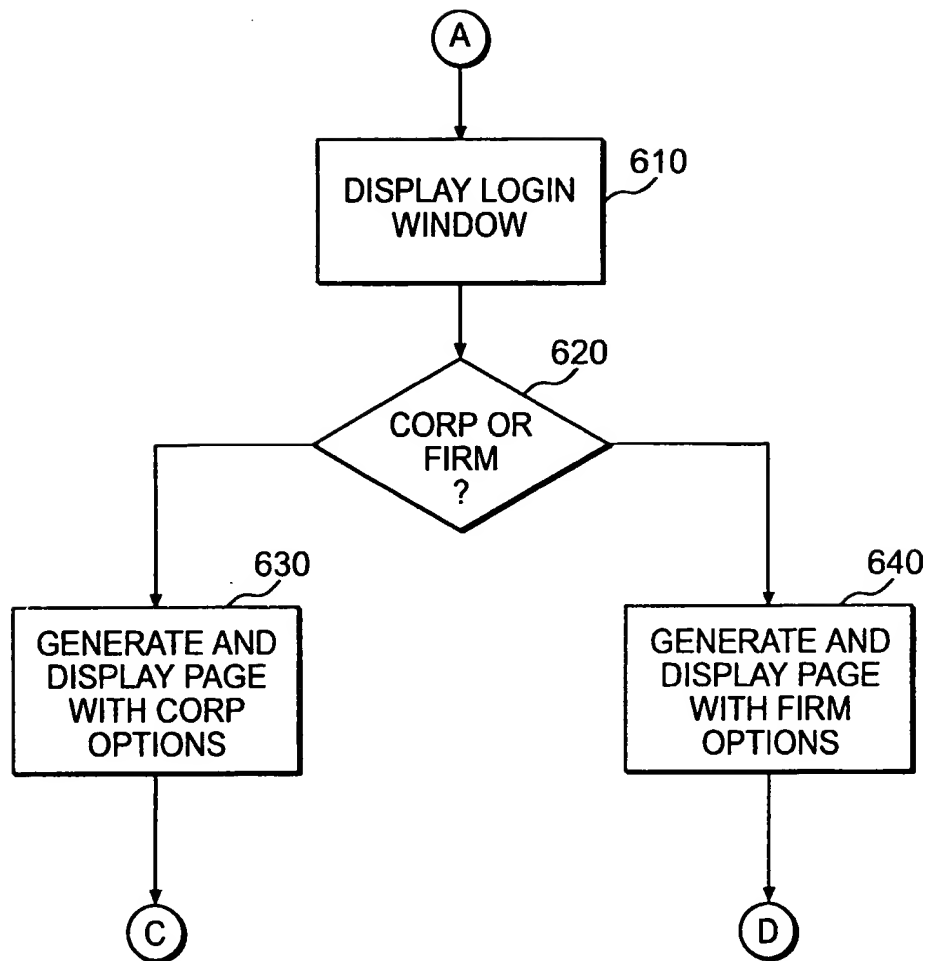
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**FIG. 4**

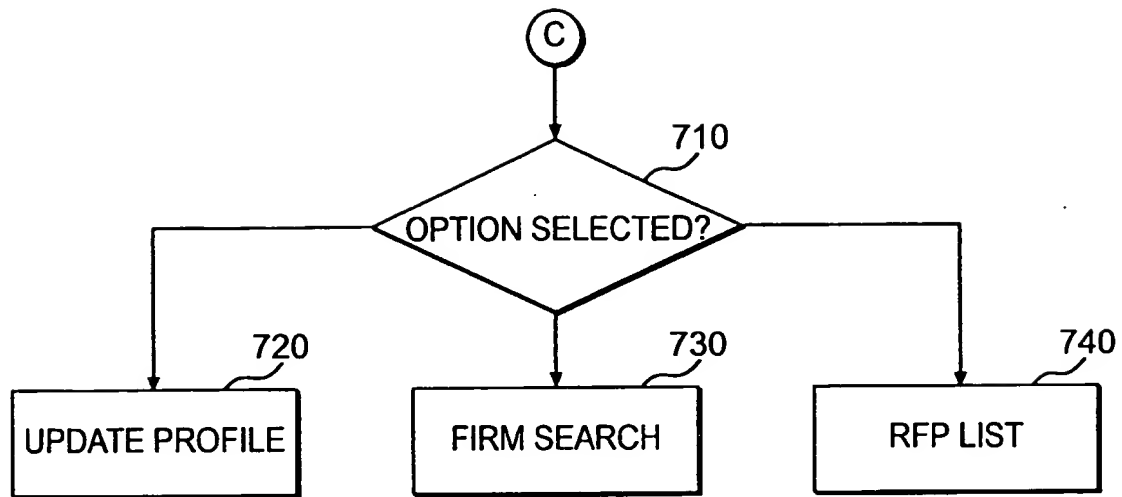
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**FIG. 5**

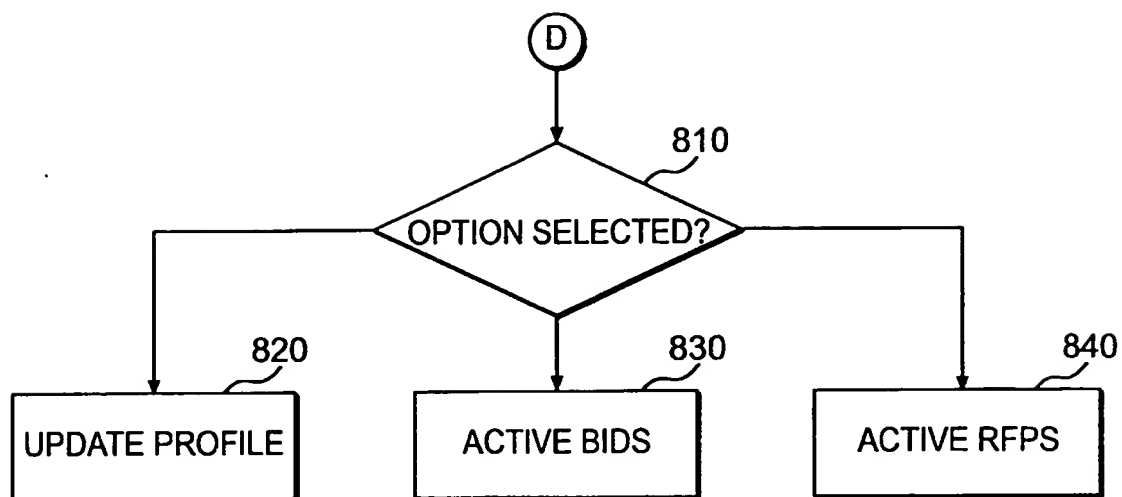
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**FIG. 6**

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**FIG. 7**

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**FIG. 8**

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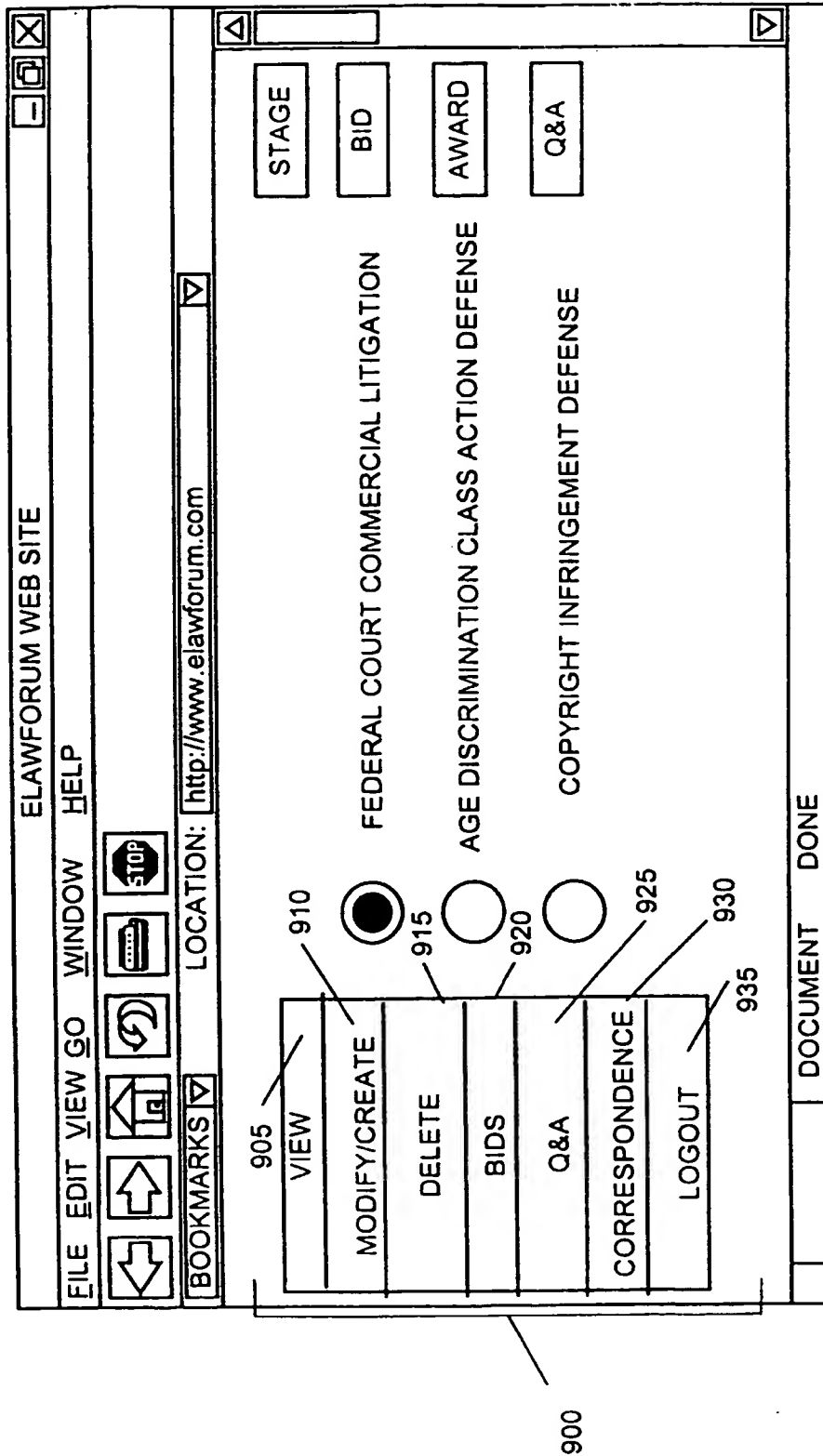


FIG. 9

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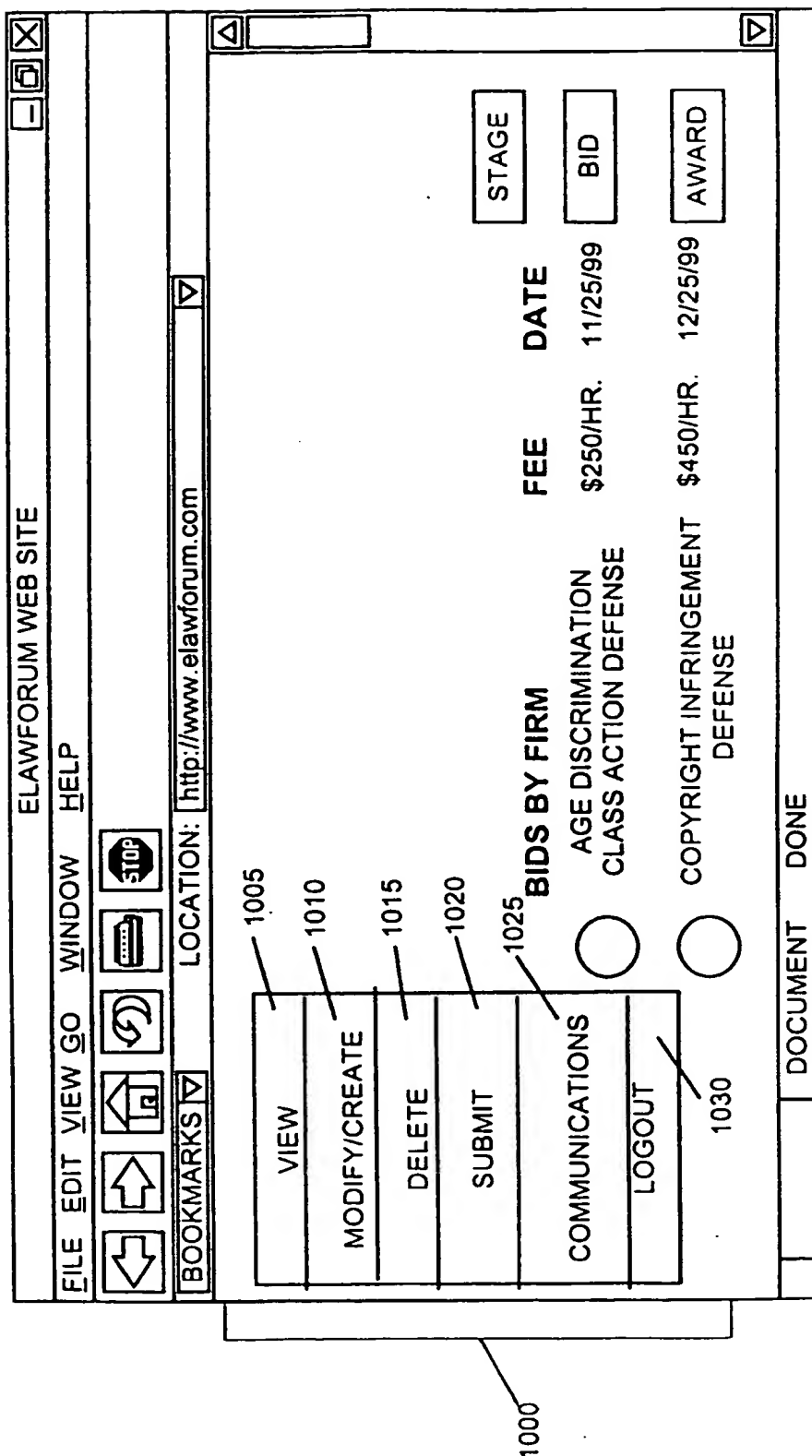


FIG. 10

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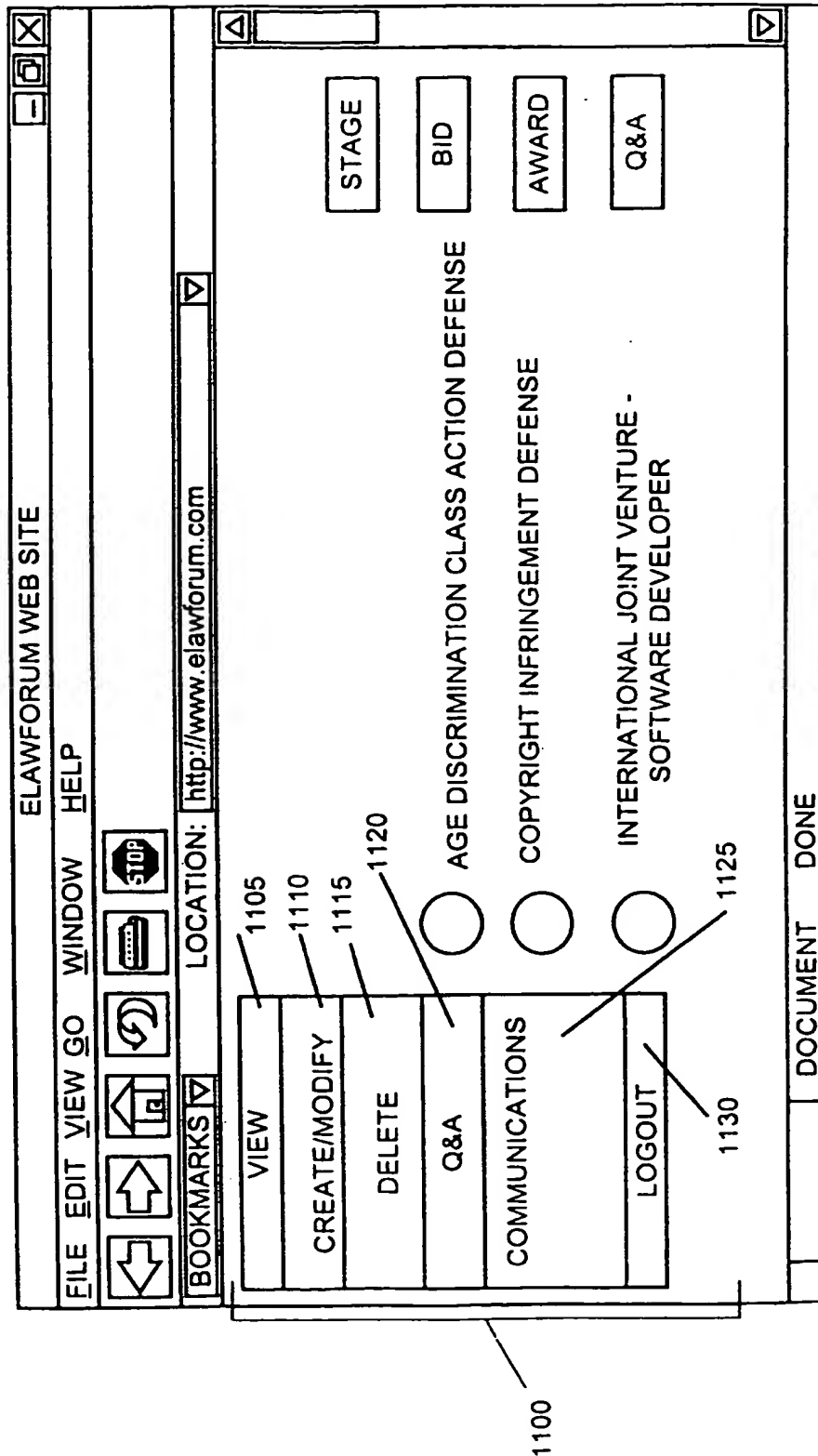


FIG. 11

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